

**Grade 8 Sample Reading Passage and Questions**  
**Reading for Information**

**"The Lost People of Mesa Verde"**

Text

Sample Questions

Scoring Rubrics

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# The Lost People of Mesa Verde

by Elsa Marston

*The Anasazi lived peacefully on the mesa for 800 years. Then they disappeared.*

In the dry land of southwestern Colorado, a beautiful plateau rises. It has so many trees that early Spanish explorers called it Mesa Verde, which means “green table.” For about eight hundred years Native Americans called the Anasazi lived on this mesa. And then they left. Ever since the cliff houses were first discovered a hundred years ago, scientists and historians have wondered why.

Anasazi is a Navajo word meaning “the ancient ones.” When they first settled there, around 500 A.D., the Anasazi lived in alcoves in the walls of the high canyons. Later they moved to the level land on top, where they built houses of stone and mud mortar. As time passed, they constructed more elaborate houses, like apartment buildings, with several families living close together.

The Anasazi made beautiful pottery, turquoise jewelry, fine sashes of woven hair, and baskets woven tightly enough to hold water. They lived by hunting and by growing corn and squash. Their way of life went on peacefully for several hundred years.

Then around 1200 A.D. something strange happened, for which the reasons are not quite clear. Most of the people moved from the level plateau back down into alcoves in the cliffs. The move must have made their lives difficult because they had to climb back up to the plateau to do the farming. But it seems the Anasazi planned to stay in the canyon walls, for they soon filled the alcoves with amazing cliff dwellings. “Cliff Palace,” the most famous of these, had more than two hundred rooms.

For all the hard work that went into building these new homes, the Anasazi did not live in them long. By 1300 A.D., the cliff dwellings were empty. Mesa Verde was deserted and remained a ghost country for almost six hundred years. Were the people driven out of their homes by enemies? No sign of attack or fighting, or even the presence of other tribes, has been found.

Archaeologists who have studied the place now believe there are other reasons. Mesa Verde, the beautiful green table, was no longer a good place to live. For one thing, in the second half of the thirteenth century there were long periods of cold, and very little rain fell—or else it came at the wrong time of year. Scientists know this from examining the wood used in the cliff dwellings. The growth rings in trees show good and bad growing seasons. But the people had survived drought and bad weather before, so there must have been another reason.

As the population grew, more land on the mesa top had to be farmed in order to feed the people. That meant that trees had to be cut to clear the land and also to use for houses and fuel. Without the forests, the rain began to wash away the mesa top.

How do we know about erosion problems that happened about eight hundred years ago? The Anasazi built many low dams across the smaller valleys on the mesa to slow down rain runoff. Even so, good soil washed away, and the people could no longer raise enough food. As the forests dwindled, the animals, already overhunted, left the mesa for mountainous areas with more trees.

And as the mesa “wore out,” so did the people. It appears that the Anasazi were not healthy. Scientists can learn a lot about ancient people’s health by studying the bones and teeth found in burials. The mesa dwellers had arthritis, and their teeth were worn down by the grit in corn meal, a main part of their diet.

As food became scarce, people grew weaker. Not many lived beyond their twenties. Women died very young, and few babies survived. Living so close together in the cliff houses, where everyone was hungry and worried, the people must have suffered from emotional strain. They probably quarreled often.

In the end, the Anasazi must have given up hope that things would get better. Families packed up and went away. Of course, the “ancient ones” did not simply disappear. They moved southeast to another area and mingled with other peoples. After a while, their heritage as the people of the Mesa Verde was forgotten.

In time the trees grew back, and the plateau became green once more. But, for the Anasazi, it was too late. Although they respected nature and tried to farm wisely, land that was used too hard could not support them forever.

Yet in their cliff houses and crafts, the “ancient ones” left us a superb monument. It is truly one of the most fascinating pictures of America’s past.

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## Questions for “The Lost People of Mesa Verde”

In the brackets below each question are the aspect of reading assessed and the percentage of students who answered the question successfully.

**1. After reading this article, what do you think is the most important information about the Anasazi?**

[Aspect: General Understanding Percent Acceptable: 60%]

**2. The three moves made by the Anasazi are listed below. Explain the possible reasons that were suggested in the article for each move.**

500–1200 A.D.—The Anasazi moved from the alcoves to the top of Mesa Verde.

1200 A.D.—The Anasazi moved back down into the alcoves in the cliffs.

1300 A.D.—The Anasazi left Mesa Verde.

[Aspect: Developing Interpretation Percent Extensive: 9%]

**3. If you had lived with the Anasazi at Mesa Verde, would you have preferred living on the top of the mesa or in the cliff houses built into the alcoves? Explain your preference by using information from the article.**

[Aspect: Reader/Text Connections Percent Full Comprehension: 29%]

**4. If you could talk to the author of this article, what is one question you could ask her about the Anasazi that is not already answered in the article? Explain why you would want to know this information?**

[Aspect: Reader/Text Connections Percent Full Comprehension: 15%]

**5. Which idea from the text about the Anasazi do the photographs support?**

- a. They were able to create many useful objects.
- b. Farming was probably their major source of food.
- c. Wood seems to have been their primary building material.
- d. Their life became much easier when they moved into the cliff dwellings.

[Aspect: Developing Interpretation Key: A Percent correct: 70%]

**6. Imagine that you are living with the people of Mesa Verde during the 1200s when they left the mesa. Some of your friends and neighbors do not want to leave the area. Based on information in the article, what would you tell these people to convince them to leave?**

[Aspect: Examining Content and Structure Percent Full Comprehension: 41%]

**7. The Anasazi's life before 1200 A.D. was portrayed by the author as being**

- a. dangerous and warlike
- b. busy and exciting
- c. difficult and dreary
- d. productive and peaceful

[Aspect: Developing Interpretation Key: D Percent correct: 59%]

**8. The title and photograph on the first page of the article are probably meant to make the disappearance of the Anasazi seem to be**

- a. a personal tragedy
- b. a terrible mistake
- c. an unsolved mystery
- d. an important political event

[Aspect: Developing Interpretation Key: C Percent correct: 84%]

**9. Some people say that the Anasazi's success as a civilization may have actually caused their own decline. Using information in the article, explain why you agree or disagree with this statement.**

[Aspect: Developing Interpretation Percent Extensive: 12%]

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## **Grade 8—“The Lost People of Mesa Verde”**

### **Scoring Criteria for Constructed-Response Questions**

**Note:** Performance results may not total to 100 percent due to off-task and omitted responses.

**Question 1. After reading this article, what do you think is the most important information about the Anasazi?**

#### **Scoring Guide**

##### **Score and Description**

###### **Acceptable**

These responses provide a specific detail or a general impression from the passage that relates to some aspect of the Anasazi portrayed in the article.

###### **Unacceptable**

These responses contain inaccurate information from the article or inappropriate personal opinions about the article. They do not provide any valid information or appropriate interpretation about the Anasazi as they were portrayed in the article.

[Acceptable 60%, Unacceptable 40%]

**Question 2. The three moves made by the Anasazi are listed below. Explain the possible reasons that were suggested in the article for each move.**

500–1200 A.D.—The Anasazi moved from the alcoves to the top of the Mesa Verde.

1200 A.D.—The Anasazi moved back down into the alcoves in the cliffs.

1300 A.D.—The Anasazi left Mesa Verde.

#### **Scoring Guide**

##### **Score and Description**

###### **Extensive**

These responses identify a reason for all three moves, even though the reasons for all the moves are not explicitly discussed in the article. These responses go beyond simply restating the article to interpret some of the information provided in the article as it relates to the moves.

###### **Essential**

These responses identify a reason for three of the moves discussed in the article. The reasons may be brief or simple restatements of information in the article as long as they are logical and taken from the passage.

###### **Partial**

These responses discuss reasons for only one or two of the moves described in the article. They receive credit for one explanation if they state that the article did not provide possible reasons for the first move.

###### **Unsatisfactory**

These responses do not identify the reasons provided by the article for any of the moves that were made by the Anasazi. These responses may provide some facts about the Anasazi but do not relate them to any of the moves.

[Extensive 9%, Essential 16%, Partial 56%, Unsatisfactory 15%]

**Question 3. If you had lived with the Anasazi at Mesa Verde, would you have preferred living on the top of the mesa or in the cliff houses built into the alcoves? Explain your preference by using information from the article.**

#### **Scoring Guide**

##### **Score and Description**

###### **Evidence of Full Comprehension**

These responses state a preference and provide an explanation that reflects an appropriate interpretation of information in the article. The evidence must logically support the preference and must come directly from the article.

###### **Evidence of Partial or Surface Comprehension**

These responses state a preference but explain it with a vague or somewhat unclear interpretation of the information in the article. Or, they may not state a preference, but they may use information from the article to explain the conditions on top of the Mesa and in the alcoves. Or, they state a preference but use information from the article that does not support their preference.

###### **Evidence of Little or No Comprehension**

These responses contain inappropriate information from the article or personal opinions about the article that demonstrate no understanding of life on top of the mesa or in the alcoves. They may answer the question but not explain their preference. Or, they may only repeat information from the prompt.

[Full 29%, Partial 44%, Little or No Comprehension 22%]

**Question 4. If you could talk to the author of this article, what is one question you could ask her about the Anasazi that is not already answered in the article? Explain why you would want to know this information.**

#### **Scoring Guide**

##### **Score and Description**

###### **Evidence of Full Comprehension**

These responses pose one unanswered question about the Anasazi and provide a clear explanation of how this additional information would be useful. The explanation must be noncircular. For example, it may focus on why the question is puzzling or how the answer might be useful on a personal level.

###### **Evidence of Partial or Surface Comprehension**

These responses demonstrate some understanding of the article by posing a question that is not answered in the article. However, the question is accompanied with a circular explanation or no explanation. Or, they may ask a question about the Anasazi experience that is only vaguely answered in the text and provides essential information about the Anasazi.

###### **Evidence of Little or No Comprehension**

These responses contain inappropriate information from the article or personal opinions about the article but fail to pose any questions concerning the Anasazi. Or, they pose questions that are already answered in the article. Or, they pose questions that provide no indication that they have read the passage (e.g., questions about the author).

[Full 15%, Partial 51%, Little or No Comprehension 25%]

**Question 6. Imagine that you are living with the people of Mesa Verde during the 1200s when they left the mesa. Some of your friends and neighbors do not want to leave the area. Based on information in the article, what would you tell these people to convince them to leave?**

## Scoring Guide

### Score and Description

#### **Evidence of Full Comprehension**

These responses discuss one or more ways of convincing the Anasazi to leave the mesa. The arguments are based on appropriate information from the article.

#### **Evidence of Partial or Surface Comprehension**

These responses discuss one or more ways of convincing the people to leave the mesa. They do so, however, with arguments based on personal conjecture rather than information from the text. Or, they use broad statements such as "If you stay, you will die" rather than specific information from the article.

#### **Evidence of Little or No Comprehension**

These responses contain inappropriate information from the article or personal opinions about the article that fail to address the need to leave the mesa. Or, they address the issue using inaccurate information to support their opinion.

[Full 41%, Partial 29%, Little or No Comprehension 22%]

**Question 9. Some people say that the Anasazi's success as a civilization may have actually caused their own decline. Using information in the article, explain why you agree or disagree with this statement.**

## Scoring Guide

### Score and Description

#### **Extensive**

These responses assess the statement and provide an explanation that focuses on more than one aspect of the Anasazi's lifestyle. They demonstrate an explicit understanding of causal relationships between events and outcomes by connecting and integrating ideas across the text with their own ideas about the statement. Or, they must demonstrate their understanding of the paradox of success leading to decline.

#### **Essential**

These responses state whether they agree or disagree with the statement and provide an appropriate explanation that is based on information in the article. The explanation must demonstrate a clear understanding of the statement.

#### **Partial**

These responses state whether they agree or disagree with the statement, but their explanation is based solely on inappropriate information from the text. Or, they provide some information from the article about the Anasazi but do not relate it to why the civilization declined.

#### **Unsatisfactory**

These responses do not discuss the validity of the statement. Or, they simply state their agreement with no explanation or an explanation relying on circular reasoning. Or they give an elaborate opinion that is not text-based.

[Extensive 12%, Essential 16%, Partial 30%, Unsatisfactory 25%]

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